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## MEMOIRS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK-LORE SOCIETY.

VOL. IV. CURRENT SUPERSTITIONS, BY FANNY D. BERGEN.

THE fourth volume of these memoirs, in virtue of its theme, is likely to receive more general notice than those which have preceded it. The work is avowedly only a first essay at a complete gathering of the material, the gleanings having been made under the greatest difficulties, during years in which the editor was confined to her chamber, and in great measure by the way of correspondence. The information presented relates only to such notions as make up the tradition of the English-speaking white population of the United States and Canada, and which on the whole may be regarded as of English origin; even with this limitation, only one half of the matter is here printed, Mrs. Bergen having in reserve a mass of superstitions nearly as extensive in compass, relating to beliefs connected with animal and vegetable life. It is the more surprising that a work should have been completed, including 1475 different items of popular credence, and covering, without notes and introduction, one hundred and twenty-three octavo pages.

It has been said that this material belongs, for the most part, to the oral tradition of immigrants from Great Britain. This is no isolated phenomenon; such is found to be the case, in general, with the remains of folk-lore in English-speaking districts of the New World. To cite a statement of the introduction:—

Language is the most important factor which determines usage and influences character; this result is effected through the literature, oral or written, with which, in virtue of the possession of a particular speech, any given people is brought into contact. In this process race goes for little. Borrowing the tongue of a superior race, a subject population receives also the songs, tales, habits, inclinations which go with the speech; human nature, in all times essentially imitative, copies qualities which are united with presumed superiority; to this process not even racial hostility is a bar. . . . In the case of superstitions, the diffusive process, though less rapid or effectual than in tales, is nevertheless continually active; in Europe, at least, a similar identity will probably be discovered. But in this category, the problem of separating what is general, because human, from that which is common, because diffused, always a complicated task, will be found more difficult than in literary matter, and without the aid of extensive collection insoluble. It is possible to fall back on the consideration that, after all, such resolution matters not very much, since in any case the survival of the belief indicates its humanity, and for the purpose of the study of human nature borrowed superstitions may be cited as confidently as if original in the soil to which they have emigrated, and where they have indissolubly intertwined themselves with thought and habit.

As regards corresponding British superstitions, the means for comparison are hardly adequate, on account of the lack of complete and orderly exhibition of the matter; information is to be found scattered in many publications; among these, beside the older works, such as those of J. Aubrey, "Miscellanies" (1696), and J. Brand, "Popular Superstitions" (ed. W. C. Hazlitt, 3d ed., London, 1870), may be mentioned the following: E. Harland and T. T. Wilkinson, "Lancashire Folk-Lore" (London, 1867); J. Napier, "Folk-Lore, or Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland" (Paisley, 1879); W. Henderson, "Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders" (publication of the Folk-Lore Society, London, 1879); C. S. Burne, "Shropshire Folk-Lore" (London, 1883); "County Folk-Lore, Printed Extracts" (publication of the Folk-Lore Society, London, 1893). To these may be added items contained in the organ of the Folk-Lore Society, the "Folk-Lore Record," "Folk-Lore Journal," and "Folk-Lore;" and in "Notes and Queries" (gathered in "Choice Notes, Folk-Lore," London, 1859); together with collations not pretending to original research. As the notes attached to the volume of Mrs. Bergen do not enter on the field of comparative examination, it will be worth while to offer, by way of illustration only, a few of the parallels presented by the tradition of Great Britain.

The first and second items of Mrs. Bergen's book offer variants of a pretty and well-known rhyme, in origin astrological, concerning the influence of the days of the week on the character of the child; the second is the correct form (Henderson, p. 9), the first exhibiting transportation of the properties belonging to the days.

2. Monday's child is fair of face,  
 Tuesday's child is full of grace,  
 Wednesday's child is sour and sad,  
 Thursday's child is merry and glad,  
 Friday's child is loving and giving,  
 Saturday's child must work for a living;  
 But the child that is born on the Sabbath day  
 Is blithe and bonny, good and gay.

The days are governed by the planets, Luna, Mars, Mercurius, Jupiter, Venus, Saturnus, Sol. The child of Venus must have a sweet disposition; thus the old Roman belief here overpowers the more modern Christian distrust of Friday, as the day of the crucifixion.

Under the sub-heading "Introduction to the World" the collection gives:—

17. Take the baby first into the sunlight on Sunday. Put it into short clothes and make all changes on that day.

18. To make a child rise in the world, carry it upstairs (or to the attic) first.

19. The baby must go upstairs before it goes downstairs, or it will never rise in the world.

20. To be a bright baby, it must go up before it is carried down, and it must be bumped to the attic roof for luck.

21. A young baby was taken up a short step-ladder by its nurse before being for the first time carried downstairs, lest it should die before it was a year old.

22. A child will have a nature and disposition similar to that of the person who first takes him out of doors.

23. The first time a baby is taken out of its room, it must be taken up, or it will not go to heaven. If the door of the room steps down, then the person carrying the baby must step up on a chair or book with the baby in her arms.

24. Let the baby have or touch the thing he starts after on taking the first step, and he will always get what he wishes. If it be the moon, then let him touch something light, on which its light shines.

25. When taking the child into your arms for the first time, make a good wish for him; if you give him his full name and he opens his eyes and looks at you (answers to his name), it is good luck.

26. To be a bright baby, it must fall out of the crib before it is eleven months old.

27. If a baby does not fall out of bed, it will be a fool.

28. A child's tumbling out of bed is a sign he will never be a fool.

As to the carrying abroad on Sunday, the American superstition does not seem to be general; but with regard to Shropshire we read: "The Colliery people think it very unlucky for the mother to go out of doors, even over the door-step, till she goes to be churched" (Burne, p. 286). "It is essential that both child and mother should come downstairs for the first time on a Sunday, and that the mother should go to church on a Sunday, when she first leaves the house. Everything must be done on Sunday for the first time, in order that it may be successful" ("County Folk-Lore," No. 2, Suffolk, p. 12).

As for the carrying up instead of down, as exercising a symbolical influence on the future life, the custom is still pretty universal in England. In 1818, the "New Suffolk Garland" contained a notice of the usage:—

There is an extraordinary notion in regard to the birth of children. As soon as they are born they ought, it is said, to be carried upstairs, or they will not *rise* to riches and distinction in their after life, and accordingly, if there are no attics for the nurse to climb up into, she will sometimes mount upon a chair or stool with the new-born baby in her arms. ("County Folk-Lore," No. 2, p. 10.)

So in Shropshire:—

The first time an infant leaves its mother's room it must be taken *up*-stairs, not *down*. Should there be no upper story, the nurse gets over the difficulty by mounting on some of the furniture with the child in her arms, to insure that its first step in life may be taken upwards. (Burne, p. 285.)

The relics of such beliefs still surviving in America imperfectly represent the variety and precision of ancient practice, which may further be exemplified by the following citations: "It was said in Yorkshire that a new-born infant should be laid first in the arms of a maiden before any one else touches it." (Henderson, p. 12.) "Immediately after birth, the newly-born child was bathed in salted water, and made to taste of it three times." (Napier, p. 30.) So still in Ohio:—

40. Always give a baby salt before it tastes aught else. The child will not choke, and in general it is a good thing to do.

To the "first food" taken by a child great importance is attached in savage custom. Salt, as a preservative principle, is a talisman and protection against evil spirits:—

In visiting any house with baby for the first time, it was incumbent on the person whom they were visiting to put a little salt or sugar into the baby's mouth, and wish it well. (Napier, p. 33.)

The following have reference to baptism:—

7. If a child cries during baptism, it is the devil going out of it.

8. It is lucky for the child to cry at baptism, but unlucky for the god-mother to wear mourning.

9. If twins are brought to baptism at the same time, christen the boy first, or else he will have no beard, and the girl will be beggared.

The belief as to the luck of crying is general:—

In the north, as in the south of England, nurses think it lucky for the child to cry at its baptism; they say that otherwise the baby shows that it is too good to live. Some, however, declare that this cry betokens the pang of the new birth; some that it is the voice of the evil spirit as he is driven out by the baptismal water. As to the mother's churching, it is very "uncannie" for her to enter any other house before she goes to church; to do so would be to carry ill-luck with her. It is believed, also, that if she appears out-of-doors under these circumstances, and receives any insult or blows from her neighbors, she has no remedy at law. I am informed that old custom enjoins Irish women to stay at home till after their churching as rigidly as their English sisters. They have, however, their own way of evading it. They will pull a little thatch from their roof, or take a splinter of slate or tile off it, fasten this at the top of the bonnet, and go where they please, stoutly averring afterwards to the priest, or any one else, that they had not gone from under their own roof. (Henderson, p. 16.)

Before baptism the child was more liable to be influenced by the evil eye than after that ceremony had been performed, consequently before that rite had been administered the greatest precautions were taken, the baby during this time being kept as much as possible in the room in which it was born, and only when absolutely necessary carried out of it, and then under the careful guardianship of a relative, or of the midwife, who was professionally skilled in all the requisites of safety. Baptism was therefore administered as early as possible after birth. Another reason for the speedy administration of this rite was that, should the baby die before being baptized, its future was not doubtful. Often on calm nights, those who had ears to hear heard the wailing of the spirits of unchristened bairns among the trees and dells. I have known of an instance in which the baby was born on a Saturday, and carried two miles to church next day, rather than risk a week's delay. Another superstition connected with baptism was, that until that rite was performed it was unlucky to name the child by any name. When, before the child had been christened, any one asked the name of the baby the answer generally was, "It has not been out yet."

When baby was being carried to church to be baptized, it was of importance that the woman appointed to this post should be known to be lucky. Then she took with her a parcel of bread and cheese, which she gave to the first person she met. This represented a gift from the baby—a very ancient custom. . . . It was also a common belief that if, as was frequently the case, there were several babies, male and female, awaiting baptism together, and the males were baptized before the females, all was well; but if, by mistake, a female should be christened before a male, the characters of the pair would be reversed—the female would grow up with a masculine character, and would have a beard, whereas the male would display a feminine disposition and be beardless. I have known where such a mistake has produced real anxiety and regret in the minds of the parents. (Napier, pp. 30-33.)

The remains of superstition surviving in America constitute, as will be seen, only a small remnant of a great and most serious body of ancient usage. Yet our information is all of the present century. What must have been the precision, extent, and force of mediæval practice and belief? Doubtless, popular notions have been affected by Christian mediæval theology; but it would be a mistake to attribute the former to the latter; the relation is the reverse. If baptism is regarded as a potent charm, if it is (or lately was) felt that unchristened babes may belong to the world of lost spirits, the blame is not to be laid at the door of the philosophy of the schools, even though such philosophy constrained Dante to exhibit infants as enduring the "sorrow free from pain" of the first circle of the Inferno. To explain the strength and apparently logical force of such opinions, we must go back thousands of years in time; instead of a Christian initiation into the society of the redeemed we must regard

the pagan initiation of the child, its presentation (as in later days Christian babes were presented) to the deities and to the priests of its gens, a ceremony which alone gave it a right to the privileges and protection of the clan, as, on the other hand, it severed the infant from the power of hostile demons who were at any moment prepared to carry it away, to devour it, or to enter its mouth and dwell within its body, unless debarred by supernatural watchers, whose especial duty in consequence of the ceremonial reception it became to protect the babe. Essentially, this conception fully survives in the mind of the peasant who watches his child lest it be taken by fairies, as Napier mentions the "practice common in some localities of placing in the bed where lay an expectant mother a piece of cold iron to scare the fairies" (p. 29). "Children are in greater danger of being taken before baptism than after" (p. 20).

As an example of uncivilized rites of this character may be mentioned the ceremonies of childbirth in the pueblo of Sia (M. C. Stevenson, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 1894, pp. 132-142); these include, on the fourth morning (four being the sacred number), a presentation of the infant to its father the Sun. By such comparison it becomes plain that the history of a superstition may be the history not only of philosophies and religions, but also of the fundamental causes which lie behind the latter, and have determined their origin and progress.

The relation which has been shown to exist between the American and English superstitions could be traced out through the nineteen chapters of Mrs. Bergen's collection. Our space admits but a few scattered notices. The fourth chapter is entitled "projects," that is to say, the forecasts employed by young women to determine the future partner in life; these practices are so numerous and singular as to form a complete survival of divination; the number here brought together amounts to one hundred and thirty-nine, while even this gathering can only be a part of the material. The name is popular, to "try projects" being the technical term for these experiments, particularly usual in connection with Halloween parties; but I have had no success in an attempt to discover the meaning of the expression. It may be modern, or it may be a survival of the technical language of some form of magic, such as crystal-lomancy. Herewith, however, hangs a curious story, relating to a well-known incident in American colonial history, and illustrating the manner in which arise historical myths.

In a book entitled "*Annals of Witchcraft in New England*," Boston, 1869, p. 189, the writer, S. G. Drake, remarked that the principal accusers and witnesses in the witchcraft prosecutions of Salem, Mass., in 1692, were eight girls from eleven to twenty years of age,

and added with reference to their conduct previous to the accusations: "These females instituted frequent meetings, or got up, as it would now be styled a club, which was called a circle. How frequent they had these meetings is not stated, but it was soon ascertained that they met to "try projects," or to do or produce superhuman acts." He supposed that they probably had in their possession some book on witchcraft. From this statement of Drake's, it seemed natural to presume that some evidence for the modern word would be found in the seventeenth century. Examination has shown, however, that the idea was derived from a paper by S. P. Fowler, who in an address before the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass., in the year 1856, had remarked that the girls in question were in the habit of meeting in a "circle" in the village, to practice palmistry, fortune-telling, etc. This notion Mr. Fowler seems to have obtained by transferring to the time of the trials his experience in connection with spiritualistic "circles" of his own day; and this suggestion Drake improved by supposing that the children in question had employed the same devices which may be studied in the chapter of Mrs. Bergen's collection. Acceptance of Fowler's statement, however, was not confined to Drake; it has been reiterated, over and over again, with additions and improvements, by most of the recent writers on the subject, one of whom has detailed the conduct of the children with as much minuteness as if personally present, although an examination of the evidence is sufficient to show that in point of fact there existed no such "circle" and no such meetings.

Mrs. Bergen's book includes a most curious chapter on charms used to remove warts, of which she gives more than fifty. In connection with these may be cited two instances to show that the effect of such charms must in many cases be real, and that superstition must often have been maintained, and apparently demonstrated by actual experience; a condition of which we have continual proof in the parallel credulities connected with "faith-healing" and "mind-healing." The first person who may be named as healed by one of these prescriptions was Francis Bacon. About 1575, when fifteen years of age, he was much troubled by warts, especially by one of a peculiarly obstinate and disagreeable character. Lady Paulet, the wife of the English ambassador in Paris, with whom at that time Bacon was living, a woman, as he says, free from superstition, assured him that a method of cure could be pointed out; she took a piece of lard with the skin on, and rubbed the warts all over with the fat side; and among the rest that wart which he had had from childhood; then she nailed the piece of lard, with the fat toward the sun, upon a post of her chamber window, which was toward the



north." Within five weeks the warts vanished, including the obstinate one, a fact which caused Bacon to muse. The other example which has fallen within the knowledge of the writer is that of a professor in a university who was recommended to employ a similar means of relief, which he did with entire disbelief and without attention, but in whose case the results were the same as with Bacon. In many of the cases given in our collection there is an element not mentioned by Bacon, but belonging to the practice of exorcism, namely, the wishing of the warts on somebody else, as for instance in the following :—

906. Split a pea and rub the wart with both pieces, make a wish that some person shall get the wart, throw one piece over one shoulder and the other over the other (into the river), and the wart will go to the person wished.

The chapters of this volume which will perhaps be generally found most interesting, or at any rate of the greatest importance in a philosophic aspect, are those entitled respectively "Moon" and "Sun." In these we are dealing with mythologic survival; both are unique, the section devoted to the moon being by far the most interesting gathering of such usages made in the English tongue. As it cannot be supposed that the readers of this Journal will in every case possess the book of Mrs. Bergen, we shall make no excuse for here citing certain of the rhymes included in the collection :—

1080. Repeat, looking at the new moon the first time you see it, —

New moon, true moon, tell unto me,  
Who my true love is to be;  
The color of his hair, the clothes he is to wear,  
And when he 'll be married to me.

1081. On first seeing the new moon, hold any small object in the hand while you repeat, —

New moon, true moon, reveal to me  
Who my true love shall be;  
The color of his hair, the clothes he shall wear,  
And the day that we shall wedded be.

Put the object — handkerchief, pebble, or what not — under your pillow at night, and you will dream of your future husband.

1082. New moon, moon,  
Hail unto thee!  
In my sleep upon my bed,  
May the one I am to wed,  
In my dreams smile on me.

1083. If you see the new moon over the right shoulder, take three steps backward and repeat, —

New moon, true moon, true and bright,  
If I have a lover let me dream of him to-night.  
If I 'm to marry far let me hear a bird cry,  
If I 'm to marry near let me hear a cow low,  
If I 'm never to marry, let me hear a hammer knock.

One of these sounds is always heard.

1084. Say to the new moon over your right shoulder, —

New moon, new moon, come play your part,  
And tell me who 's my own sweetheart,  
The color of his hair, the clothes he shall wear,  
And on what day he shall appear.

Then dream.

1085. The first time you see the moon in the new year, look at it and say : —

Whose table shall I spread ?  
For whom make the bed ?  
Whose name shall I carry ?  
And whom shall I marry ?

Then think of one you would like to marry, and go your way. Ask some question of the first person you meet, and if the answer is affirmative, it indicates that you will marry your choice ; if negative, it means you will not.

With regard to these rhymes exhibiting moon-worship, and to the sayings directing those operations which aim at the encouragement of growth to be undertaken in the wax of the moon, while those that contemplate the removal of obstacles are to proceed during the wane, it is remarked in the introduction : —

Lunar change has had an important connection with ancient myth as well as with primitive ritual. For the reason indicated, the crescent was assigned as an emblem to goddesses of growth. This ornament passed from Cybele and Diana to Mary ; as on the vault of St. Mark's the Virgin wears the starry robe of the earlier goddess, so on garden walls of Venice she stands crowned with the crescent, in the same manner as the divinities whom she has superseded. In this connection is especially to be considered the habit of personification implied in our English rhymes. Of late, the doctrine which perceives in myth a symbolic expression of the forces of nature has fallen into comparative discredit, a contempt explicable in view of the unscientific manner in which " sun-myths " have been exploited ; our English sayings, therefore, are to be received as a welcome demonstration that one must not proceed too far in his attitude of doubt. If the popular mind, to-day, and in a country particularly accessible to the influences of modern culture, worships the personified moon, it may be considered as certain that antiquity did the like. Mythology is woven out of so many strands that goddesses like Artemis and Diana may have been much

more than lunar personifications ; but I think it can scarce be doubted that in a measure such they were.

There is to be noted a most important characteristic of modern superstition, namely, that the original usage, and also the primitive theory, has sometimes continued the longest, because founded on the broadest and most human foundation. The modern survival exhibits those fundamental conceptions out of which grew the complicated rites and elaborate mythologies of ancient religions. In this manner, as from a height of observation, we are able to look back beyond recorded history, and to trace the principles of historic development. So may be elucidated problems which neither metaphysical speculation nor historical research has proved adequate to expound. Comparative study of folk-lore has placed in our hands a key which ingenious theorists, proceeding with that imperfect knowledge of antiquity which can be gathered from books, have lacked, and for the want of which they have wandered in hopeless error.

The discovery of the intimate relation which the motion of the sun has had, and still in a measure continues to have, to every-day household life, is quite original with Mrs. Bergen, as far as known, such relation not having been remarked in any country, though doubtless everywhere existent. The items of superstitions relating to this subject ought here to be cited for the benefit of the members of the American Folk-Lore Society who may not receive the work.

1141. To make good bread, stir it with the sun. To make good yeast, make it as near sunrise as possible.

1142. If you wish to secure lightness, you must always stir cake and eggs a certain way, that is, the way the sun goes.

1143. Eggs and cake are commonly beaten and butter made by stirring sunwise.

1144. To make cake light, it must always be stirred the same way.

1145. In cooking soft custard, the stirring must be continued throughout in the direction in which it was begun ; otherwise the custard will turn to whey.

1146. If, after turning the crank of a churn for a while with the sun, you change and turn the other way, it will undo all the churning you have done.

1147. Ice cream will not freeze rightly unless the crank is turned the right way.

1148. In making lye soap, if you stir it backward it will turn back to lye.

1149. In melting sugar for taffy, stir always one way, or it will grain.

1150. In greasing the wheels of a carriage, always begin at a certain wheel and go round in a set way.

To these should be added a number of "cures" in which the operation is only satisfactory when the rubbing or moistening of the part affected is performed sunwise.

A collection like that under consideration requires to be made a more accurate definition of superstition than those hitherto in vogue; and an attempt of this sort has been made in the introduction.

The chief value of a collection such as the present consists in the light it may be made to cast on the history of mental processes; in other words, on its psychologic import.

To appreciate this value, it is needful to understand the quality in which superstition really consists. This distinguishing characteristic is obscured by the definitions of English dictionaries, which describe superstition as a disease, depending on an excess of religious sentiment, which disposes the person so affected to unreasonable credulity. In the same spirit, it has been the wont of divines to characterize superstition and unbelief as opposite poles, between which lies the golden mean of discreet faith. But this view is inadequate and erroneous.

It is, however, sufficiently obvious that the signification mentioned does not have application to the omens recorded in the present volume, the majority of which have no direct connection with spiritual beings, while it will also be allowed that these do not lie without the field ordinarily covered by the word superstition. For our purposes, therefore, it is necessary to enlarge this definition. This may be done by emphasizing the first component part of the word, and introducing into it the notion of what has been left over, or of survival, made familiar by the genius of Edward B. Tylor. In these lingering notions we have opinions respecting relations of cause and effect which have resulted as a necessary consequence from past intellectual conditions. A superstition, accordingly, I should define as a belief respecting causal sequence, depending on reasoning proper to an outgrown culture. According to this view, with adequate information it would be possible to trace the mental process in virtue of which arise such expectations of futurity, and to discover the methods of their gradual modification and eventual supersession by generalizations founded on experience more accurate and extensive. Yet it is not to be assumed that in each and every case such elucidation will be possible.

This accidental quality, and the arbitrariness with which phenomena are judged to be ominous, will be visible in the numerous "signs" here recorded. At first sight it may be thought that extreme folly is their salient quality. Yet if we take a wide view the case is reversed; we are surprised, not at the unintelligibility of popular belief, but at its simplicity, and at the frequency with which we can discern the natural process of unsystematic conjecture. Such judgments are not to be treated with derision, as subjects of ridicule, but to be seriously examined, as revealing the natural procedure of intelligence limited to a superficial view of phenomena.

This consideration leads to an important remark. The term survival expresses a truth, but only a part of the truth. Usages, habits, opinions, which are classed as superstitions, exhibit something more than the unintelligent and unconscious persistence of habit. Folk-lore survives, and popular practices continue, only so long as endures a method of thinking corresponding to that in which these had their origin. Individual customs.

may be preserved simply as a matter of thoughtless habit ; yet in general it is essential that these usages should be related to conscious intellectual life ; so soon as they cease to be so explicable, they begin to pass into oblivion.

Our notice has extended to a considerable compass ; but it seems proper that the opportunity should be given to all members of the American Folk-Lore Society to comprehend the nature of the memoirs which the Society is instrumental in publishing. Members can forward the success of the undertaking by inducing their local libraries to procure the volumes.

Truly scientific publication cannot be performed in the ordinary course of business, and is rendered possible only by the special agencies of universities and societies. The American Folk-Lore Society is at present especially such a publishing society ; unfortunately, it has not met sufficient public support to become an organization able also to promote research ; but every work which, like that of Mrs. Bergen, calls attention to the store of interesting and uncollected material, strengthens the agencies, at present inadequate, which are making toward a proper collection and study of the material of popular tradition.

W. W. N.